

ATTENTION: © Copyright The Iowa Blind History Archive at the Iowa Department for the Blind. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976, as amended must be followed. The following materials can be used for educational and other noncommercial purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the Iowa Department for the Blind. Excerpts up to 1000 words from the oral histories may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited. Requests for permission to quote for other publication should be addressed to the Director, Iowa Department for the Blind, 524 Fourth Street, Des Moines, IA 50309. These materials are not to be used for resale or commercial purposes without written authorization from the Iowa Blind History Archive at the Iowa Department for the Blind. All materials cited must be attributed to the Iowa Blind History Archive at the Iowa Department for the Blind.

**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Sharon Omvig
Mary Clarke
Iowa Department for the Blind, Des Moines, Iowa
9-28-2011**

Mary Clarke: My name is Mary Clarke and today I'm interviewing Sharon Omvig; last name is spelled O-M-V-I-G. We are recording at the Iowa Department for the Blind at 524 4th Street, Des Moines, Iowa. The date is

September 28, and the time is approximately 11:00. Sharon originally started at the Department working for the library, and we're going to start off our interview with that. Sharon, do I have your permission to conduct this interview?

Sharon Omvig: Yes.

Clarke: Alright, so can you tell me how you came in contact with the Department in the beginning?

Omvig: Well, I was a young college student at Central College in Pella, Iowa. And after my first year, I was looking for a summer job. So when I got back to Des Moines I went to the state personnel office. At that time, it was in the capitol building, and they did their testing and whatever. And I must have tested fairly well, I guess, because the gentleman said, "Well, I have an order for a job at the Governor's office. And so, I'd like you to go there and be interviewed. I'll set it up for you." So I went and it was a fine enough interview, but I came away just thinking, I don't know. I'm not sure I want to take that job. Somehow I just, maybe it was just a feeling or something. The man who actually interviewed me, I thought, was sort of on the cocky side. And I wasn't sure that I wanted to work with somebody like that. So anyway, the next day I went back to the personnel office, and he said, "Well, how did things go?" I said, "Well fine, but I'm not sure that I want to take that job." Well, my mother was outraged that I should be so picky (Laughter) for a summer job. But anyway, I told him that I didn't think it would be a good fit. And he said, "Well, I have an order here for a job at the Commission for the Blind. Why don't you go over there," he said, "I think you'll like them

better;” anyway, so I did. And Dr. Jernigan was away. This would have been, probably, I suppose, in late May or something like that. He was away and Mr. Valiant, Jim Valiant, interviewed me and hired me. And said, “Could you start tomorrow?” and I said, “Yes.” And so I did. That would have been, I guess, the first of June, or some time late in May of 1964.

And I worked that summer in the library. We were moving a lot of the Braille volumes at that time. There must have been some kind of a renovation that was going on, something, because I worked in the Braille stacks, I think, most of the summer. We had no air conditioning in the building at all. And it was...it was kind of a hard job. I mean, it was so hot in the stacks. And with no air conditioning, it felt like a hard job to me. But I enjoyed being at the Commission. And I don’t exactly remember if I spent the whole summer there, or maybe, I did some other library work, but I basically started in the library. And, let’s see, how did this go then?

I think I did not go back to school first semester in the fall. I think I stayed on and worked here until January, and then went back for the January semester. And I think, by that time, I was actually doing library work, maybe cataloging. And I had really, very good secretarial skills. I graduated from Des Moines Tech. And the day I graduated from high school, I had already a skill set that was very good for secretarial work. So I did some secretarial work for Mrs. Grannis and the library, and I did cataloging. And I did, I think, probably some reader advising; in other words, pulling cards to send out books to our readers, and just wherever I was needed, that’s what I did. And then I went back to school January semester.

And I remember going to Dr. Jernigan's office, and saying good-bye to him. And he said, "Well, I was just thinking that, you know, I might be moving you to another position. But if you want to go back to school, well, maybe that school will burn down before you get there." (Laughter) So anyway, I left and went back to school.

And by the next spring I was starting to think about a job again for the summer. And, I wrote to Dr. Jernigan and asked him if he would mind hiring me back for the next summer. And he said...I got a letter from him. And he said stop by and see him when I got back to the city. And so I did, and he hired me back. And my strong intention was to transfer from Central College to Iowa State University. I was a Home Ec. major, and I really wanted to...I wanted to study textiles and pattern making. And I had lots of visions of fun things I could do there. And Iowa State had a great Home Ec. department. And I knew I didn't want to teach. I wanted to do something else. And so, that was my plan.

I came back to work here in the summer, and by fall I thought I would be transferred to Iowa State University. But that second summer, I think, I started in the library, and did work in the library; but Dr. Jernigan started moving me around then. He called me a floater, but what it really did, by wherever I was needed, and whatever department, that's where I worked in the whole agency. So, I worked in Field Operations; and I worked in Accounting; and I worked in the front office with Mrs. Mayer, who was his secretary at that time. And I think I worked in Home Industries and the library, too. So it gave me a lot of experience, broader experience, about what the agency did in a broader way. And when it came time to transfer, make the transfer to Iowa State, I never did that. I stayed on.

And I thought about that particular period over the years, and what kept me here. And I think it was just this really strong sense of history. I worked in Field Operations long enough to sort of know the clients, and our orientation students, and what greater things were happening with the students who came through the center. And there was just this strong sense that history was being made. And I think I just wanted to be a part of that. So I didn't transfer to Iowa State; didn't go back to school, and stayed on here at the Commission.

And after that summer at some point, I don't remember what year it would have been; it might have been 1965 or so. Dr. Jernigan moved me, then, eventually to the Field Operations department. And I worked there for a number of years under John Taylor, as my direct supervisor; but with all of the counselors, all of the home teachers, field consultants. And by the time we got through with it, a number of secretarial people and so on. When I first moved to that department, it was a very small department. And John Taylor's office and his secretary, Carol Mane and I were all housed in what became a conference room in the corner there. Let's see, it would have been the, I think, the north-east corner of the building. But there was a renovation of the building then, too. This building, I was just saying to Dave Hauge out there a while ago; the renovations that this building has seen, just a series almost year, after year. And it still stays just so handsome.

Clarke: Yes.

Omvig: It's such a handsome, beautiful building. But then, each one of those renovations becomes dated at some

point, you know, and you have to go forward with another one. But the building itself seems to just withstand it very well. (Laughter)

There was a huge renovation right at that time, particularly of the third floor. Part of the third floor was the upper part of a huge auditorium that had been available from the old YMCA days. And it was completely renovated on that side of the building to put in flooring, and to actually make an entire third floor for the building. And that whole, let's see, what would be the north side of the building, became the Field Operations department. That little area where Carol Mane, and I, and John Taylor were became a lovely conference room. And then we had hallways built, and what I call the big room, where all of our client files were housed, and my desk, Carol Mane's desk. We had three offices off of that big room; John Taylor's office, Joe Balderston's office and Glen Sterling's office. And then three secretaries that then grew to probably five secretaries. And then off of the hallways that went down beyond that big room were counselors and field consultants and, let's see, home teachers' offices. So once you got off of the elevator, and turned left and walked into that area...that was all Field Operations. And it was glorious. We had so much space. And it was just wonderful to have all the client files in one area, and just plenty of space; although we filled it up soon enough.

I was in charge of client files. Certainly the orientation students who were here were part of that; but then also just the broad filing system that included every client who had ever had a case filed with this agency. And I was in charge of the... We kept a register in those days of all blind people in the state of Iowa. I was in charge of that, and I also, Carol

Mane worked pretty much exclusively for John Taylor. Both his, you know, his correspondence and whatever, but also all the federal reporting that was required. And I guess, that's pretty much how it was divided.

Then at some point another secretary was hired. Let's see, was it Shayden Hill was her name? And she actually, I think, did things like dictation at that point, then, for the counselors, because my job had taken on other responsibilities, too. So she worked a lot with the counselors also, because every contact with a client had to be recorded in some way into that case file. So their...you know, Dictaphones were going hot and heavy in those days. And some of the counselor's just hand wrote things. And you know, I would put those into typing and so on, but the filing was just a major part of every case; recording every plan, every piece of paper that the federal government required.

15:00

Omvig: All of that had to be maintained into a case file on each individual. We were audited by the federal government once a year, I think. And those case files...I would have been horrified if something had been out of whack or missing, so I babied those case files for a long time, and really enjoyed it. And then when people would come into our office, I would know them by name and, you know, a little bit of their history because I was a great reader of all those things, too. I read every piece of paper that I put into a case file, so that I would have knowledge of what was going on. And so a lot of people, even though I just knew them by name for a long time, they would often come in at some point or another and

I would get to meet them. I don't know what else I want to say about that.

Clarke: When you were working in Field Op, did you also then attend, like, conferences and things like that?

Omvig: Not really, except that I...in 1968 the National Federation of the Blind held its annual convention in Des Moines. And that was such an exciting time. The Federation was housed for the convention at the Savory Hotel, and the Fort Des Moines Hotel, and probably the Kirkwood. The main convention hotel was the Fort Des Moines Hotel. I don't remember how many people we had at that convention, but probably five or six hundred. And, it was very exciting to me. I joined the local chapter of the NFB that year. Dr. Jernigan asked me to be in charge of the free literature table at the convention. It was a place where people could just come by and pick up whatever they wanted and take away with them. And I enjoyed doing that; although it was pretty different from the way the convention is now. We have a literature area at the convention that is just amazing, I mean, thousands of pieces of things. And in those days, I remember, I had a lot of old, well, not old necessarily, but past Braille Monitors and, you know, a few copies of some speeches by Dr. tenBroek. But he had passed away in 1967, so I think this was the first convention that Dr. Jernigan chaired as President of the organization. That was exciting for all of us.

And then, the big exciting thing that was going to happen was that the whole convention would come to our building on the free afternoon to have a tour. And so, I helped in the preparations. We served thousands and

thousands of ears of fresh sweet corn to people, and free ice cream cones and free sandwiches. Everybody just, basically, came for lunch and had as much to eat as they wanted. It all had to be prepared, and I helped do that. And I helped...We had to ferry people from the hotels to our building and back. And I had my car; it was a 1948 Chevrolet that my father found for me, and I bought for \$25.

Clarke: Oh my gosh, yes.

Omvig: I ferried people in that car, and it would get overheated. And in the downtown Des Moines traffic it was quite a thing. But anyway, it was very, very fun to have the convention in Des Moines that summer. And this program was so important to the blind of America. It was the... By this time, 1968, it was a proven fact that the philosophy about blindness that the Federation held to, from its inception in 1940 until Dr. Jernigan came to be Director here, proof that the philosophy worked; that our whole attitude about blindness was the truth about blindness. And so, it was exciting to have the organization that really believed in this philosophy and hoped that it could be wide spread, and there could be a new feeling about blindness. This was the agency that did that. And this was the first time that the convention, I think, had ever been held in Des Moines. And people were just thrilled to come and see this agency; to see the building, to see the renovation that had happened, to meet our students. And, to know that all the things that Dr. Jernigan and Dr. tenBroek had talked about, and other leaders of the Federation, really happened right here on a daily basis. And so, it was very fun for all of us.

So I worked in Field Operations for several years really enjoyed it; really, really enjoyed working in that department. And then, at some point, I think it was about 1970, maybe, Dr. Jernigan asked me to come to the front office. By that time, we had two positions in the front office. There was Dr. Jernigan, and there was the Deputy Director, and then two secretarial positions. And, he asked me to come and be the front desk there. And I was happy to do that. I was really the secretary for the Deputy Director, who in the beginning was Jim Valliant; and he ultimately left. His parents were becoming quite elderly. He was from the state of Maryland, and he was getting worried about them. And so, he left us. And Mary Ellen Anderson, who had worked with the agency prior, in prior years, came back to the agency and became our Deputy Director. So, I was her secretary. And then I also did all of the tours. And we had so many tours in those days.

Clarke: So you assigned tours, or?

Omvig: No I just arranged for the tours. People would call and say they wanted to come and have a tour. And so, I kept the calendar for that, and I made all the arrangements. And I would greet the tours and introduce them to the tour guide. So, it was quite a calendar that we kept. We must have had an average of at least a tour a day just... There were groups in this building all the time; so that was fun.

And the person who had that position also did things like work on the state plan, in other words, type it and get it ready. And it seemed like that happened about once a year. We always had a lot of activities going on, too; a state Lions day we always had. We had an employer appreciation day. The volunteer group for the library always had a lot of

activities going. We usually had just Braille seminars and things like that. And there was just constant, constant activity. One thing I liked, really, about working here was that, yes, you had your job assignment, but there were also many other things happening to keep life interesting. Oh, I don't know; it was just fun. It was a fun and interesting place to work. And always, I was aware that the world was looking at us, that because it was in the late '60s or early '70s, we had a lot of foreign visitors. I think it was the late '60s.

There were a couple of years, there, we had just foreign visitors constantly coming to look at our program to try to take knowledge home to their country to see if, you know, they could get some kind of a program started in Pakistan, or Silom, or the United Kingdom; or, you know, there were just a string of people that came through. At that time, the Federation was doing some work internationally. Dr. Isabel Grant was a sort of a missionary for blind people in those days. And a lot of those tours came out of that kind of contact. She traveled to, oh my goodness, so many countries. And often the countries would send emissaries to the National Convention, or just to us here at the Commission; to study what we were doing and find out what our secrets were.

And that also was a time when a lot of the states were looking at doing things differently. You know, the word got around about this place. And it would find its way into legislature. And we had a number of legislators who came from other states to look at this program, and see how they could make it work in their own state. But a lot of that, too, was blind people speaking out, you know. There's this program in Des Moines, Iowa. If they can do that kind of

thing in Des Moines, Iowa, why can't we do it in our state? They have a training center there, and when the students finish the training center they do things. They get jobs, or they go on to college, or they get technical training, or in other words, there are people coming out of that center doing just the jobs that people do. And so, if they can do it in Iowa, well, couldn't we do it in New York? Or couldn't we do it in Minnesota? Or, you know, there was just a lot of that kind of thing going on. So we constantly had visitors just from the states, too, who were looking at us to see how they could make changes in their own programs to bring more empowerment to blind people. So that was exciting.

Then, a couple of years into that job, Dr. Jernigan's secretary left. And he asked me to take that position, and that was really fun. It was a fascinating time in my life. I met Jim, then. Well, that's not exactly true. I had known Jim. He came back to...I don't know where he is in his story. He decided that he did truly want to be in rehab. work, and left lawyering after a while and came back to Des Moines, and was a part of this staff. And that was in 1969. So, he and I were friends and colleagues on the staff for several years. And his marriage fell apart in that time; and he became divorced. But it was during that time, in 1973, that we started dating, and were married in January of '74.

Clarke: Same year I was married.

Omvig: Really?

Clarke: Yeah.

Omvig: Well, we'll have our 38th wedding anniversary in January. So that's exciting. You've got 38 coming up then, too.

Clarke: Coming up in March, yeah.

Omvig: Well, that was, of course, a very exciting time.

Just to divert for a moment. I told you that I read everything that ever got filed into a case file when I was in charge of those case files. So, I knew all about Jim Omvig before I ever saw him or met him. He was so highly respected by the staff here. I would hear people talk about Jim and, you know, that he would be graduating law school; that he was in Washington, and then New York. So I just, you know, people who were on an educational pursuit like that, you know, had to send reports every month to our Field Operations department to let us know how they're doing. It had to be something in writing. And so, I knew when he moved, and I knew when he was graduating, and when he passed the Bar. And, I knew all of these things about him.

30:00

Omvig: I remember Mrs. Grannis saying one time she thought that was the first big test that she had passed, when Jim Omvig graduated law school, from the library aspect, because of what was required of the library to be supportive of him when he was in law school; the tapists that were involved, and some Braille. And she thought that that was the first big test that the library had to pass, was when he graduated, if his service had been okay. And I knew who his sister was. His sister, Janet, was a student before

him, and then went on to do other interesting and exciting things. You might like to interview her some time. She's a wealth of information from the very early days. She lives in Boise, Idaho; and her husband is Harry Gawith, and she's Janet. And she's had a very interesting and fun life, too. So that might be an idea for...

Clarke: Yeah. Does she ever make it back to Des Moines?

Omgig: She does.

Clarke: So, maybe next time she comes to Des Moines we could set something up.

Omgig: I think that that would certainly be possible. I'm sure she'll be coming to visit us at some point. So yeah, I'll mention that to her.

Clarke: Great; sounds good!

Omgig: Anyway, Jim and I met, then, when he came back in '69 to be a member of the staff. And we were friends on the staff for several years, and then started dating in '73. I had been dating somebody else on the staff. And he dated, too, ladies on the staff after he was divorced. But, there was just this little window there where neither of us was dating anybody. And a mutual friend by the name of Irene Gogerty, who was on our staff here, a wonderful woman, knew that about both of us. And so, she's the one who kind of put us together there, and the rest is history I suppose.

Clarke: I met Irene Gogerty. She was a member of St. Peter's church over on the East side. And I ran into her one time, and she introduced herself. She was retired by then.

Omvig: She was a fantastic woman. She had had a whole career doing something else, and came here as an... She wasn't elderly, but she was, I suppose, probably in her 50s. And she said to me one time, "Miss Lewis, I was absolutely born to do this job. Everything else I've done in my life has led me to this place." She was so so happy here. She loved working at the Commission.

Do you live on the East side, Mary?

Clarke: I did. We live in Ankeny now. But our first house we had was over on the East side.

Omvig: Anyway, so I was Dr. Jernigan's secretary. And those were fun, exciting years. It was wonderful to work with someone every day who you truly admire, and really like working for, and with. And it was just wonderful to work with someone who, intellectually, just kept you on your toes. And I suppose, well, he was just a very, very smart man. And if you're reading, "The Blindness Revolution," you know how well he gets things worked out; and what a problem solver he was. And it was just...

Clarke: And, logically, think things through. That's what always amazed me, was how he so logically would think things through and write it down on paper.

Omvig: Exactly. It was a real special time for me. And the students by this time, now...so this was the '70s; early '70s. You know, he came in '58.

And so, he had lots of prestige in the state, and had high respect from the legislature as a body; and certainly, many individual legislators. So, I would say it was never difficult to get our appropriations. The legislative body really, I think, knew him well enough to know, and he told the staff this every year. "Now look, we are not going to pad this budget. We are going to have a budget that is what we need, and that is reasonable. And, I feel like if we go to the legislature with this kind of an appropriation that it will be given to us." And I just honestly don't remember a year that we didn't get the appropriation that we requested. He told all of the staff every year, "We do not pad the budget here." And I think, you know, he would go for hearings and testify and so on. And I'm sure he told the legislature that, too. This is what we actually need, and we always got it. He also... there were moves back in those days to do things; like, there was a move to bring all purchasing into one entity. And he really fought that. He fought hard against that, because he knew it would hurt blind people.

Our mission here was to serve blind people. And it didn't matter what political affiliation; I'm talking about, now, in the blindness movement. It didn't matter about any of those things. Our mission was to serve blind people. And if you have, let's say, a college student who needs a tape recorder, and maybe needs a Braillewriter. And in other words, those were our technologies of the day; he felt that could really hurt blind people. We knew blind people in other states who had centralized purchasing, and you know, you start school in the fall and your tape recorder might come

along around March or February or, you know, who knows when. Well, that's very hurtful to the success of a blind student in college. Nobody waits for you in college. You know, you can't say to a professor, well, I'm sorry my tape recorder isn't here. That just doesn't work. And he wanted every blind person to have as much chance for success as possible. I mean, you know, every blind person was entitled to try. And, sure, there were some failures, but he really believed that blind people had the right to fail, also, because they certainly had the right to try. So in those days we really broke down a lot of barriers.

You know, I could tell you many individual stories. Curtis Willoughby is a story that's interesting. He wanted to be an electrical engineer. And I remember that the story goes, he talked to Dr. Jernigan about it and Dr. Jernigan said, "Well, I don't know any blind electrical engineers. But if that is what you truly want to do, then go for it try." And Curtis, of course, just was a shining star at Iowa State University, and graduated as the first blind electrical engineer there, and went on to work for...

Clarke: Didn't he work for North Western Bell?

Omvig: North Western Bell, and spent time at Bell Labs. He was invited to go to Bell Labs and work for a couple of years; and did a magnificent, wonderful job. He also worked for Collins Radio. I think that was, maybe, his first job out of college at Collins in Cedar Rapids; and then North Western Bell, and then Bell Labs. And I lost track of him, even though I still know Curtis. I don't remember if he was always with Bell or not. He's retired now. But an interesting thing that he did when he still was in Des Moines was...he was a good

problem solver, also. I suppose all engineers are. And there was a problem here in Des Moines, that during the summer when air conditioning started...I'm not going to be able to tell this exactly right, probably. But, the need for energy to fill all of the air conditioning needs for the city somehow affected the telephone situation. And it was a big, huge problem that Curtis Willoughby figured out how to solve. So, you know, we had students coming through our center who went on to do very wonderful, interesting jobs for their lives. Certainly, Jim Omvig was one; Curtis Willoughby; Ramona Wallhof; and people like Sandy Tigges, and others here. And, so many people who did fascinating things came through this center. Ramona Wallhof did the Russian translation thing at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. And Judy Young, have you heard that name?

Clarke: Yes.

Omvig: You know...she had a fascinating story. She's passed away now, but she was the first blind teacher. She was the first blind person to be admitted to the Education Department at the University of Iowa. Jim should tell you this story, because he has a little follow-up thing on that, that's kind of interesting about one of her students that he met on an airplane one time long after Judy was gone. So that was a thing that Mr. Jernigan was involved in personally, and absolutely went to the wall for Judy Young to be admitted as a student at the Department of Education.

And, you know, that really means something to people. It's wonderful to know that you have this support system behind you even though, maybe, you really are being a pioneer and blazing a trail that nobody else has done. But,

you know you've got Dr. Jernigan and the whole Commission for the Blind at your disposal, helping you figure this out and make it come true. So those were just exciting years.

There were students coming out of here, and then graduating from colleges and universities and just doing great things. I remember one of the...I always felt like... You know, there are federal rules and regulations that govern a program like this, besides your state policies and so on. I always felt that there were a lot of states that looked at those federal rules and regulations and said to themselves, I'm going to follow this to the nth degree, and we're not going to go any further than we have to, to try to make this person successful. And Dr. Jernigan took the other path that said, here are the federal rules and regulations, and we're going to follow those. But, there was a certain amount of interpretation that was allowed either way and he would always go with, I don't want to say a looser interpretation, but one that...an example comes to mind. A lot of agencies would not let their blind students go out of state for college or university. They had to go to an in-state school. Well, for Peggy Pinder, or Peggy Elliott now, that would have meant she couldn't go to Yale. That would have meant Jim couldn't go to Loyola. It would have meant Ramona couldn't have gone to Georgetown. I just thought that he was always, not even generous, isn't the word that I want, but he... Empowering blind people was really his, we didn't call it that then; but that was just really his thing, his motto, his... It was how he operated to give just the best possibility for that person to be successful.

45:00

Omvig: I remember the story about Mark Mauer, for instance, who is a kid from Boone, and who used to bring the Greyhound bus down from Boone, just to be able to browse in the library. He was always a reader, and he was going to go to some little...he's Catholic, so he was going to go to some little Catholic school somewhere kind of close. And Dr. Jernigan said to him one day, "Well, if you want to go to a Catholic school, why don't you go to Notre Dame; that's a Catholic school. You know, it's got lots of prestige and that would look good on your resume," I suppose he was thinking, or something like that. Well, you know, Mark did end up going to Notre Dame. He tried to expand the horizons. He tried to say to our students and our clients, "You know, look at the bigger picture. You could be part of that, too. It's not just for sighted people. And so, you know, think a little bigger if you can." And that was so good for our clients and students.

So anyway, I worked, then, with Dr. Jernigan 'til 1978 when we left the state. And it was just, you know, just a great time and he was... Anybody who worked here at the Commission worked hard, I will tell you.

Clarke: I believe that's true.

Omvig: One time Les Wilson, who was our accountant in those days. And he was here a long time. Mr. Wilson said, "This is the hardest job you will ever love." And I thought, well, that really says it well. We all worked hard. Dr. Jernigan had high expectations for not just himself, but the whole staff. And that's part of what made it all work, because we did all work hard. But it wasn't all just hard work. He, Dr. Jernigan, was just a guy who had a really

funny sense of humor. He was just very enjoyable to work with. So I was here about 14, 15 years, I guess, and really really enjoyed it.

Another part of my job, when I became his secretary, was fun for me. And that was... We were not renovating the student rooms, but we were doing all new draperies. And actually, not just the student rooms, but I think some offices in the building, as I recall. And he knew I really enjoyed that kind of thing, working with fabrics. So he put me in charge of that, and that was fun. I did that along with everything else I did. And then, let's see, he added in, we had a custodial woman, a wonderful woman who did cleaning on the 5th and 6th floor. She did not clean student rooms, because they were responsible to do that. But when a student left, she would clean that room and get it ready for the next student. And she kept the bathrooms clean; just stuff like that. He put her under my supervision, and that was fun for me; and interesting for me, to start to learn how to supervise people. So it was a great job, and really more of a career, and more of a way of life, I guess.

Clarke: You had a lot of variety that's for sure.

Omvig: A lot of variety. And I enjoyed that part of it, too; very much. If my secretarial skills had required that I sit in an insurance office and type things all day long, I would have been looking for another job. But being an employee here just offered so much variety, and interesting people to work with. Dr. Jernigan hired interesting people of interesting backgrounds, you know. Irene Gogerty had her own background, and seven kids of her own. And she always had

lots of funny stories to tell, and what have you. But, everybody here really had a pretty interesting background.

Dr. Jernigan was here from '58 until '78, and it really was a Camelot. I think there will never be another program just like it. There never had been before, and I don't think there ever will be again. We have some Federation centers around the country that are good, and do very well. And the Iowa Department has kept on keeping on all these years after he left. But there'll never be another Camelot like the first one here, I don't think. It was the chance of a lifetime, and I'm so glad we took it. Do you have other questions for me?

Clarke: Well, the only other question, because I came in '74, and then...

Omvig: You came to Iowa?

Clarke: I came to Iowa in '74, and then I went into teaching. And so, I never knew why Kenneth Jernigan actually left. Is that...are you comfortable with talking about that?

Omvig: Sure. You know, it was a hard time for all of us. And you might want to get Jim's perspective on this, too.

By 1978, first of all, the legislative complexion was changing in Iowa. There were some new people in the legislature that seemed to only be interested in sort of criticizing. But to run a program of this size, and to be as well known as he was, and to be as well loved as he was, you do also make some people irritated at you; particularly if you're trying your best to bring a group from second-class citizenship to first-class citizenship. That's what we were

really doing by demanding that discriminatory things come to a halt; like that whole university of Iowa thing for Judy Young. You make people irritated. And not that any of them were involved in the 1978 thing, but I think there had been also.

See, by this time he had been President of the National Federation of the Blind, doing both jobs since '68; the last ten years. And the Federation took stands, also, and continues to do so to this day. It's what the Federation is about, you know; trying to protect people from horrendous kinds of discrimination. You make some enemies. And, I think it was a time of coming together of a few people. Also, he had fired one person on the staff who...a blind person who later then sued the Commission; the Harold Carter case. And I will tell you, and this you can just leave right on this tape. I worked with Harold Carter, personally, and he should have been fired a long time before he was fired. I think Dr. Jernigan hated to fire him, but ultimately had to. I worked with the man, and he was not a hard worker; let me just say that. He should have been fired from this staff ages, and ages before Dr. Jernigan actually did it. Well, he wasn't, but that also kind of was a preliminary thing to some of the other stuff.

You know, there really weren't that many people involved. But it was, you know, people like the Des Moines Register and Tribune, who Dr. Jernigan told this story. And he sat at...I can't remember who exactly it was. But somebody from the R&T who sat at his dinner table one night and said, "This newspaper can make or break anybody it chooses." And ultimately, one of those people was Kenneth Jernigan they chose.

Clarke: I can believe that. Seems like what goes on in the media today. I can see that statement.

Omvig: So there was the person who was in charge at the R&T at that time. He had been the college roommate or, I can't remember. There's something about college roommates being two of the people involved in this thing. And, there just came to be an unraveling of all of the good will that had been built for 20 years; of all of the good work that had been built for 20 years. It got to be sort of a feeding frenzy. You got the R&T on one hand saying, "We can undo any person we choose, and right now we're choosing you;" to a couple of legislators, to a couple of people in the national realm. See, we were also fighting against the National Accreditation Council for Agencies serving the Blind and Visually Impaired, the big accreditation group. There were people there who hated Dr. Tenbroek and hated Dr. Jernigan, so one person piled on you know, I guess six more decided well this is the time.

And by March of 1978 Dr. Jernigan said, "This isn't doing the program any good, and I'm going to step down." Now, it was kind of unfortunate. He talked to the board, I think, it was the year before, '77, about the possibility of stepping down; that maybe he would like to go on and do some other things. It was also becoming difficult, I'm sure, for him to...I mean, he worked day and night, seven days a week. I know this to be true. I was his personal secretary. I know that that is exactly the way he worked. And, I was in on a lot of it. I worked a lot of those hours also, so I know how hard people work. And it wasn't just the two of us. I mean, he built a staff that said, you know, hard work counts for something, and we believe so much in this program;

we're going to do our part. Well anyway, I think, it became harder and harder for him just physically, to manage directing this program and also directing the Federation. The Federation continued to grow, and grow, and grow. Well, it was two full-time jobs that he was trying to do, so he had talked the prior year about maybe stepping down and going on to do something else; probably just being the President of the Federation, as I said, was a full-time job. So he could have just done that, but you know, he had been here 20 years; built this program from nothing. He loved the teaching part of it. I think Jim mentioned earlier that he loved coming to teach that philosophy class sometimes, whenever he had felt like he could take the time from the rest of the work. There was so much of his blood, sweat and tears in this program. I think it was hard for him to do. And, I suppose in retrospect, we all wish he had done that in 1977. It would have changed the course of history; but he didn't. And by '78, though, we had had, I think I counted one time, more than 200 negative articles in the Register and Tribune.

Clarke: Oh my gosh!

Omvig: And so, you know, by that time people, even if you're a believer, you can get worn down if the paper says it day, after day, after day, after day. So he didn't want the prestige of the agency to go away, and so he stepped down in March of '78.

1:00:00

Omvig: It was a culmination of a few people who really didn't like, either him personally, or the success of this agency, or

the success of blind people, or all of those things; who saw an opportunity, you know, that once somebody sort of starts on the down spiral, hop on and take them all the way down. I thought at that time, we...really after the worst part of it was over I thought, you know, most people would have caved, I think, and just gone away and not done anything. It was fierce! It was a fierce, fierce time in the history of the Commission and the movement of blind people. But stand we did, and are stronger for it, even though, personally, it was a hard time for him. It was a very hard time for Jim and me, and others on the staff. What has come out of that period is, as far as the Federation is concerned, was huge growth, huge depth in the organization, leadership depth. None of that would have happened. Our national center came out of that, and it's a fabulous place. So much good came because he refused to be done in. And he had an organization. There were a few people who peeled off, but you know, there were situations that were dealt with in the next few years. But essentially, and overwhelmingly, people stood with him.

Clarke: Well, the philosophy still carries through here.

Omvig: His philosophy still goes forward.

Clarke: And that is the important thing.

Omvig: And you're right. I mean, that is so important and something that he would be so glad for. He's been gone, now, since '98. And so, you are beginning to have many, many leaders, who don't have the Jernigan thumb print. You see, Jim is 76-years-old. And I was so glad when he wrote,

“Freedom for the Blind,” because he was really the last person who had been a student at the center; who had directed the center himself, who worked closely with Dr. Jernigan all those years, and after, who knew, you know, what the center was all about. And, you know, there were always people who were saying, “Tell us your secrets of how is it, now, that you get blind people to believe this new attitude about blindness?” Well, you know, it’s not hard; it’s pretty simple. But, in a way it’s hard because a lot of people don’t want to take the time to do it.

But the philosophy lives on, whether you’ve got the personal thumbprint or not. The philosophy is sound, and it works. And it does live on. And I think it’s something that will never die because now there are too many people who believe in it, and there have been too many people through the years who were really willing to sacrifice to make sure that the philosophy lived on. Dr. Jernigan sacrificed a lot. I mean, I don’t know anybody who works seven days a week, not now, not even then. He worked all the time. Now, he could do that, I think in part, because he loved it so much and he didn’t consider it work.

You know, when he was working with the students, he often he would get a bunch of students for breakfast on Sunday morning, or he’d have a bunch of students come for dinner on Sunday night, and they’d grill, you know. They’d go up to the roof and grill steaks, and just do so many fun things that it wasn’t like work, necessarily; or he would entertain legislators a lot. Jim and I used to help him with that as much as we could. And we enjoyed it, too. And, you know, there were all those days at the state fair, back in those days, and all the county fairs. There was just always something going on. And so, with that kind of variety you

know you just don't consider all those hours work. But I think by '78, when all those horrible things happened... I mean, it's just sort of funny to think about now, that some of the things that came out of the nastiness of those half dozen people was just terrible.

You know, one day the FBI showed up here and said, "We want to see your cash of weapons." (Laughter) What! I mean, it was...then the article in the newspaper would say, "Cash of weapons at the Iowa Commission for the Blind," when there was none.

Clarke: Oh my gosh!

Omvig: Or, oh, they talked about...the newspaper articles talked about the cash of food and water that we have here. Well, we were an air raid shelter. We were a state shelter for, you know, if you have a catastrophe. So, of course, we had all this food lined up. And, we had the swimming pool, and what have you. But, you know how it is with the media; those things don't get explained.

Clarke: So, all those crackers that were... (Laughter)

Omvig: All those crackers, exactly! (Laughter) Oh gosh! There were days that just were so hard, that I thought I might just have a heart attack. You know, it was just so stressful. But we all made it and we, Jim and I ended up leaving then, too.

In '78 Jim went to a new job at Social Security headquarters in Baltimore. And they actually...we were in a big tussle with Social Security right at that time, because they had hired a number of blind people, but dead-ended

them into jobs that would not let them climb the federal ladder like all federal employees do, you know, from whatever grade they started at. I don't remember 7, 8, or something like that. Well, all federal employees can keep climbing. And the blind employees, they dead-ended into jobs that then would not let them apply for anything else. And, it just happened that the NFB convention was in Baltimore that summer, when we were having all these... I mean, blind people were really getting upset that they couldn't progress in a job, ever. And yet they're in this great federal system where if you do progress, you really can have a pretty good job at the end.

Well, our legislative people in the Federation said, "You know, you guys ought to think about hiring somebody from the blind community who can work from inside your system to get this problem solved, because if you don't, we're not going to be able to hold these people back. We're going to have to come and picket you; probably while our convention is in Baltimore this summer." Well, Social Security didn't want blind people picketing them, and they decided that might not be a bad idea. So, Jim Omvig was chosen as the person to go, (Laughter) and he was there six years. And, I worked for Dr. Jernigan another year after we made the move to Baltimore, and was on the original staff when we opened the National Center for the Blind. There were about five or six of us in 1979.

But, the Commission for the Blind has in Des Moines, I think, has been a wonderful piece of history for the state of Iowa. It... Certainly, back in the day that I'm familiar with, it was a treasure to the state. It saved enormous tax dollars, because of all of the blind people who went to work in regular jobs in those days; good paying jobs. I mean, you

know, everything; literally, from dishwashers to attorneys, and teachers, and farmers, and whatever. It was always very nice to be able to say I worked at the Iowa Commission for the Blind. And, you do really great things here, so I really enjoyed all my years at the Commission. Those last ones were hard, but sometimes good things are hard. But, you know, it gave a chance for people to stand up and say, I believe in something right here. And so, I guess you could say that the program was saved. It was... I don't know what happened to the staff. And what happened, then, at the Commission over the years was probably not exactly the way Dr. Jernigan would have had it. But, you know, there were some casualties, but that's part of the history now, too.

Clarke: I don't know a lot of the staff from that time; but I do know that the staff that are here now are very dedicated staff.

Omvig: Well, that's wonderful!

Clarke: They really are! And I think it shows in the longevity that the staff have here. There's a lot of them that have worked for many, many years here.

Omvig: And that was true, too, back in the day; not very much turnover. And, people just didn't know...we just all loved working here. It was a great staff, then, too; just a great group of people, very flexible group of people who, you know, if something needed to be done, there was always somebody to do it.

Jim and I have had an interesting life, since we left. And, he has probably told you some about that.

Clarke: Yeah, I think we left off just when he's coming back to Iowa.

Omvig: Oh, way back in '69?

Clarke: Yeah.

Omvig: Oh, well you've got a ways to go then.

Clarke: Got a ways to go.

Omvig: Well, I really have enjoyed all the days and years of my career, and all the times Jim and I have had. And just how strongly he really... Jim always has been motivated by giving back. He has always felt that he owed, and still owes a great debt of gratitude to, yes, certainly to Dr. Jernigan; but all those who came before him and made things possible. And, I mean, he will never tire of giving back to the cause of blindness. Not ever.

Clarke: Right. I can see that.

Omvig: So, for as long as he has to do good, he will keep on doing it. And we only marvel, sometimes, at the fact that we're now 66 and 76-years-old, and how did that happen? (Laughter)

Clarke: There are times when I see what's going on in the educational system in the school system. And I think, oh, I

should be out there and teach, be teaching, you know; give these kids these opportunities. And then I think, oh, but I'm 68-years-old. (Laughter)

1:15:00

Omgig: Exactly. I can see why you would think that. I can become despairing about our educational situation sometimes.

Clarke: Yes, me too. I see things that, really just kind of discourage me.

Omgig: Yeah.

Clarke: Well, one thing you can, you know, as far as this program goes...you know the philosophy is strong, and that's the important thing.

Omgig: Well, that gives me hope; it really really does. I don't know what the numbers would be these days about 26 closures. You know, are we closing people out of the rehab system with good jobs in Iowa?

Clarke: In general, I think so. And now, I'm out of the system for several years. But for one thing, you know, there was always only so many could be homemakers. Okay, you know, I know that our counselors do work very, very diligently in placing people, or helping people get placed in challenging positions.

Omvig: Well that's good. Jim, I don't know if he'll tell you this story or not. But one time, I think it was when we were in Maryland, he was talking to a legislator about the value of rehabilitation, and how in the long run it saves so much money for the state and federal government to spend these rehab dollars. And, he kind of went through the whole thing with the legislator. You know, I was a student at the center, and that cost money. And I was a student in undergraduate school, and that cost money. And I went to law school, and that cost money. And yes, the Commission hired readers for me and bought me a suit or two, or whatever. And you know, by the time he got done with it, he had some kind of a figure that he thought would be reasonable for that rehab. cost for himself. And, the legislator was aghast, you know; thought it was a pretty big figure. But, then Jim turned it around and said, "But think about this now--I have a job and I contribute taxes at every level. And I do this for the rest of my working days, and then some. But then, also, think about not just the taxes that I pay back into the system, but all of the money that I don't take from the system."

Clarke: Right.

Omvig: "I don't take Social Security Disability anymore." And you know, it comes out...at that time, it came out to be several hundred thousand dollars saved just on one person.

Clarke: Right.

Omvig: So, it behooves all of us to empower blind people to go and dream their dreams, and help them make them come

true. Not just for the self worth of that person, but financially, for all of us.

So, it's just been exciting, though, from the early, early day when I was here. So that was '64, not all that long after Dr. Jernigan came on the scene. He came in '58, and I started in '64. So the program was really young, when I think about it. Of course, I came just as a person not knowing anything about the Commission for the Blind, or really anything about blind people; thinking, well, this must have been in place for a long time. And, you know, I guess it's always been here. But then when I realized that it hadn't, it was a fairly new program, I just remember thinking, "I bet you are going to make history here somehow." So, it was fun to be part of that historical time.

I came here, though probably with a little different attitude about blindness than some. Jim told you that he saw people begging on the street in Des Moines, blind people selling things or whatever. I never saw that. I'm ten years younger than Jim, so probably that's part of the reason. But when I was a little girl in the neighborhood on the East side where I grew up, there was a blind couple who lived behind us. And they were just a couple like anybody else in our neighborhood. They were both blind but he worked. He went to work every day, and she was a housewife just like my Mom. And you know, they just didn't seem that different to any of us who lived in that neighborhood. It was a totally different experience than Jim had. I don't know what that man did, but he went to work every day like my Dad did, and his wife was a homemaker like my Mom, so I thought, well they were just, as I thought back on it, I just thought of them as normal, ordinary people. So I think that was a little different than experiences that a

lot of people had had from the old days. Well, do you have any other questions for me, Mary?

Clarke: No I don't. And thank you so much.

Omvig: I sort of rattled on here.

Clarke: That's alright. And thank you for doing this interview. I have found it just so fascinating, just going through the past, and being able to connect to the beginnings. You know, that's special to me, and to a lot of people I know.

Omvig: Well, if you're reading, "Revolution," right now, it does give you a really good sense, I would think, of the early days and how certain things happened, and how they came about, the different things Dr. Jernigan did to make it happen.

1:22:25

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

10-28-2011